

Addressing questions about HPV from patients with head and neck cancers

These answers address the questions that patients thought most important to them in language they found clear and accessible. After discussion, patients may find the accompanying leaflet useful to take home.

When patients ask:	Try saying:
What could have caused my cancer?	It could have been caused by a virus called HPV (Human Papillomavirus). HPV causes about half of oropharyngeal cancers (which can involve the tonsils, tongue base and soft palate). It also causes cervical cancer and some cancers of the vulva, vagina, penis and anus. It affects both men and women, and it is so common that most of us get it at some point in our lives.
What does this mean for my cancer treatment?	Head and neck cancers caused by HPV usually respond well to treatment.
How did HPV cause my cancer?	In a few people, HPV stays in the cells of the affected area for many months or even years. Then it sometimes causes the cells to change, and that may eventually lead to cancer. Even if HPV causes cells to change, it can take another 10 years or more for cancer to develop.
If HPV is so common, why doesn't everyone have this cancer?	That's because HPV is usually cleared by the body's own defences. There generally aren't any symptoms so most people never know they had it.
How did I get HPV?	The virus is passed from one person to another during sex or physical intimacy. HPV can be transmitted by oral sex and there is some evidence that it may be transmitted by deep or 'French' kissing.
Who did I get it from?	It is hard to know when you got HPV or who you got it from. That's because it may have been many years ago.
Could I pass HPV on to my friends or family?	There is no evidence that HPV can be passed by everyday contact with friends and family such as sharing drinks or kissing on the cheek.
Is there any treatment for HPV?	There is no treatment for HPV but there's now a vaccination to prevent it. It's best for young people to be vaccinated before they are sexually active.

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*Hendry M et al. Talking about human papillomavirus and cancer: development of consultation guides through lay and professional stakeholder co-production using qualitative, quantitative and secondary data. BMJ Open 2017;<insert number>. doi:<insert doi>

